

RONALD DUNLOP: RECENT AUSTRALIAN POETRY
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Introduction:

Poetry Australia N° 32, 1970, was a special 'Preface to the Seventies' issue focussing on new poetry. This piece by Ronald Dunlop, a regular reviewer for *Poetry Australia* and a long-time Associate Editor of the magazine, was not commissioned specially for the issue, though the topic seemed to fit, more or less. Interested viewers might note that five of the seven poetry books under review were produced by the Sydney firm of Angus and Robertson in 1969. They were the days. JT, 2013.



Photo: Ronald Dunlop, 1964

Paragraph 1 follows:

IF, AS MATTHEW ARNOLD SUGGESTED, a community must provide the climate for its poetry, the work of contemporary Australian poets suggests that, whether they see it as the private rag and bone shop or as the rose garden, they find in the local environment ladders of some sort from which they can take in the view and report back to those of us still looking about from ground level. Whether what they see engenders belief or disillusionment, love or

hate, faith or scepticism, is in a sense irrelevant. The poems that are their responses to what they see are as diversified as the ages, tastes and attitudes of the poets themselves; but they have two things in common: belief in their art and belief in its inseparability from the life about them. The poets whose work is considered here have done much to consolidate the place of poetry in present day Australian writing. The younger of them have confirmed earlier promise; the older (two or three have been writing since the thirties) give proof of sustained energy and responsibility and of continuing faith in the permanence of art. None of the poets is new to Australian readers; some have already made themselves known in England and America: a glance at the acknowledgements in some of the volumes shows that they are establishing themselves in the larger world of Poetry in English. This is partly due, particularly in literary America, to a lively interest in what is going on elsewhere; but success overseas cannot be put down wholly to the catholic interests of readers and critics abroad; it also owes much to the widening horizons of writers themselves, who, particularly since the Second World War, have learnt what Brennan knew long before: that while swagmen and gum-trees have their places in the sun, they are small places in a crowded world. Looking at the recent Australian poetry represented here, acknowledging its unevennesses, one is aware of its acceptance of the responsibility that comes with the gift of words and finds in this the measure of its achievement.

2:

Of today's younger writers, Randolph Stow is one of the most considerable. To his work as a poet must be added that as a novelist.

The commissioning of a poem by the Poetry Book Society for the 1965 Commonwealth Festival of the Arts, and the success of the musical setting of his *Eight Songs for a Mad King* are milestones in his development over the past ten years (he is still in his early thirties). It is with special interest, then, that one takes up his *A Counterfeit Silence** a selection from the poetry he has written between 1954 and 1966. From the outset the poems manifest his preoccupation with words. In the first poem of the selection, he savours them lovingly to a degree that calls to mind the early Keats. He himself is aware of the danger latent here. In 'Seashells and Sandalwood' he writes

3:

My childhood was seashells and sandalwood, windmills
and yachts in the southerly, ploughshares and keels,
fostered by hills and by waves on the breakwater,
sunflowers and ant-orchids, surfboards and wheels,
gulls and green parakeets, sandhills and haystacks, and
brief subtle things that a child does not realise,
horses and porpoises, aloes and clematis —
Do I idealize?

Then — I idealize.

4:

It could be argued that in this poem, the voice of conscience is asserting itself over the sensuous revellings of the young poet. But a poem like this paves the way for the firm touch of these lines from the Commonwealth Festival poem, 'Stations', with their beautifully managed Wordsworthian overtones:

5:

There was a time, but I do not remember,
when this warm-reeking woolshed was a fortress,
the wall-slits for muskets, and my parents
sentries alert against the shadowy clans.
I remember only peace, the predicted harvests,
the shadows dwindling beneath our ascending sun.

6:

Dominating the background of Stow's poetry is the Western
Australian landscape.

7:

Dead eyes have loved and changed this land I walk
in the grief of time, watching the skins of children
harden under its sun. — My sad-coloured country,
bitterly admired

8:

he writes. But to call him a landscape poet would be to mistake
quite its role in his work, spelt out in poems like 'The Land's
Meaning' and 'The Singing Bones'. After the sombre earlier sections
of 'Thailand Railway', the final dream of the prisoner-of-war comes
like a benediction:

9:

... after a black day's work, this vision comes.
Children on horseback, hordes of my own country,
riding my country: children, my acres' heirs.

10:

Here, landscape slips into place. Randolph Stow's poetry, strongly
rooted in the earth, reaches out from it to the other world of

humanity. Essentially the poetry of experience, its promise is great, its performance so far impressive.

11:

Unlike Stow, Les A. Murray is what would have been termed in an age less self-conscious about its literary terminology a poet of the outback. The poetry in his new book, *The Weatherboard Cathedral** comes directly from his knowledge of and affection for the land and its people. These positive values give his work warmth that could not be achieved by the simple desire to herald the triumph of the good earth over city sin. In his most characteristic poems, 'Troop Train Returning', 'Recourse to the Wilderness' or 'The Wilderness', for example, journeys inland 'beyond the Divide' or to 'the waterless kingdom' become pilgrimages in search of self and old values. In 'A Walk with O'Connor', to move away from 'the red-tiled houses' and beyond the cemetery to the farther beach is to engage in the 'Quest that summons all true men'. Even in 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow', a poem that at first reading may seem to be an indictment of the inability to understand or even to recognize suffering, the poet's concern is with suffering itself, identified with the primeval in man, with earth and sea, understood by

12:

Only the smallest children
And such as look out of Paradise

13:

rather than with the uncomprehending city folk that crowd into the poem. The serious tone of most of the poems in this volume is

occasionally relaxed to good effect when Murray reveals another engaging self. 'Susan and the Serpent – A Colonial Fiction' is the story of the murder of a snake by a genteel young lady made barbarous by the inhospitable land in which her parents have sought to build for themselves a little England, a story told with an ironic decorum that provides half the fun. In 'The House of Four-X' (a brand of Queensland beer) he celebrates the achievement of the man who built a home of empty bottles,

14:

... every one of them drained
As a point of honour
By the solitary owner

15:

a poem in which the comic and the serious work harmoniously together. And in a neat, amusing epigram, he shows that he can turn his hand quite adeptly to sharp-shooting:

16:

I shot an arrow in the air,
It fell to earth in Taylor Square
Transfixing, to my vast delight
A policeman and a sodomite.

17:

The interests of Bruce Dawe's fourth book, *Beyond the Subdivisions*,* are sharply contrasted with those of Randolph Stow and Les A. Murray. Very much a poet of the here-and-now, he moves swiftly through a variety of moods, provocative, amusing, harsh or gentle, sometimes all present in the one poem. In his verse he works with a direct, repetitive syntax that imparts to it a bustling manner

epitomizing the modern urban world in which it is set. This provides much of the starkness of 'Homecoming' (a poem about Vietnam dead); it underlines the angry frustration of 'Bloody Hopeless', and gives 'Up the Wall' its ironic flatness:

18:

She says, 'They nearly drove me up the wall!'
She says, 'I could have screamed, and then the phone—!'
She says, 'There's no-one round here I can call
If something should go wrong. I'm so alone!'
'It's a quiet neighbourhood,' he tells his friends.
'Too quiet, almost!' They laugh. The matter ends.

19:

Generally, *Beyond the Subdivisions* is a sombre book. The plastic surgeons of 'The Unforeseen', discovering only 'a mask beneath a mask beneath a mask' (a line Dawe shares with A. D. Hope who uses it in 'On an Engraving by Casserius'), bring to mind Swift's observation that flaying makes surprisingly little difference to a man's appearance, though in Dawe's poem there is more pity than bitterness. The V.I.P. on the operating table, like the train travellers of 'Still Life' or the XOS Spinster, is caught up in a web from which there seems to be no escape. But passive acceptance is alien to Dawe's poetry, and the final poem in the collection, 'Homo Suburbensis', closes on a strong note. The 'one constant in a world of variables',

20:

He stands there, lost in a green
confusion, smelling the smoke of somebody's rubbish
Burning, hearing vaguely the clatter of a dish
in a sink that could be his, hearing a dog, a kid,
a far whisper of traffic, and offering up instead
Not much but as much as any man can offer
— time, pain, love, hate, age, war, death, laughter, fever.

21:

Nan McDonald's *Selected Poems** is a quietly modulated book. In almost all the poems the thread of religious belief is clearly discernible (though it is not 'religious poetry'); many of them are set in a nostalgically recalled past of early childhood, old houses and a fairly conventionally visualized Australian countryside. The outcome is smooth but unadventurous verse. Nan McDonald is too practised a writer to jar the ear as some of our more venturesome poets sometimes do. But one misses the enterprise that accepts technical hazards. Some poems are weakened by romantic hankerings for escape from the realities in which poetry begins. While 'The Crab Apple', a charming if slight descriptive poem, succeeds because it is just that, 'The Old Summit Road', a poem of much greater possibilities containing some fine lines, trails away rather unconvincingly as the poet contrasts 'the cramped room' where

22:

... so much lies broken, dulled, betrayed,
Past healing now

23:

with the memory of

24:

Granite and snow and flowers again for spring.

25:

The best poems are those in which the romantic imagination is brought hard up against the realities and made to accept them. In 'The Bus-ride Home', for example, a conventional enough landscape of blue dusk rolling inland from the sea, the darkening range and yellow street lamps is harmonized with the blunt requiem for the miner 'brought up to being dead'. In 'Transmigration', two visions of paradise gather strength from the very flatness of the final stanza that dissipates them:

26:

To choose between two heavens
Would take a stronger head
Than mine, which solves no problems
But bids me, when all's said,
Lift up the same old weight of flesh
And take it to be fed.

27:

'The Lightship', the most arresting poem in this selection, succeeds because of the inevitable way its paradox of life and death flows from the single, dominating image of the ship, saviour and destroyer:

28:

Hers is the knell that sounds above the grave;
Hers the lamp shining clear within the tomb:
One after one, good seamen, skilled and brave,
Went mad there, listening for a human call,
Stared till their brains burnt out in the water's blaze.
The searchers found no trace of them at all.

The storm-wind rises; louder the bell tolls —
Lord God, how lonely is man on this dark sea!
Have mercy on us, and on all drowned men's souls.

29:

In one sense, all Grace Perry's poems are occasional: responses to a given moment, a given experience, hammered out hot, scarcely given time to cool before being put on paper. Whether a poet can sustain writing of this sort without forfeiting the order demanded by poetry depends on his ability to evolve a style that can maintain coherence without losing impetus. Grace Perry has managed to do this, and evidence of her success is to be seen in her most recent volume, *Two Houses**. The way her poems develop is demonstrated (not explained) in 'Dahlia', with which this collection opens.

30:

Like the dahlia
words break surface
and open out
upon a sea of green
then for a season
offer plates of colour
wavering in windruffled rows.
I walk among them
as they join and separate
nodding to one another
in discreet recognition
shaking feathery heads
in the stilted manner of suspended birds.

31:

Here, image tumbles over image till, like colours on a spinning wheel, they fuse to present a whole, apprehended in the imagination even if sometimes they baffle the mind. Her method has much in common with that of the painter (it is surely no accident that one of her most successful sequences is ‘Calendar 1968 – thirteen poems on pictures) and like paintings, and in much the same way, her poems must be seen whole. Conventional guidelines of logic and syntax take a subordinate place as the poem, exploiting to the full Grace Perry’s rich resources in language, responds to the quick shifts of her mind. Even in poems whose subject seems to invite a more ratiocinative approach, the process is the same. The interesting and effective poem on the nature of poetry, ‘The Poem is elsewhere’, begins formally enough:

32:

Poetry lacks practical usefulness;
poetry lacks philosophical implication;
poetry lacks formal mirrors,
telephone, computer, microscope.

33:

But it soon moves from aphorism to image and from assertion to direct sensuous appeal:

34:

This night of frost
we prepare spices and liniments
for our own protection
keeping vigil for the wintersun;
and the day comes
and the stone is rolled away
and the word within the stone.

Behold the angel; be not afraid.
The poem is elsewhere;
the living move among the dead.

35:

Like Bruce Dawe, Grace Perry works with material found in the day-to-day experience of a busy life: a suburban train, Important Persons, lunch at a university, writing, or people in their many roles. From it comes a stimulating body of work, seen to advantage in the present book.

36:

A. D. Hope and James McAuley have much in common. They share a traditionalist regard for formal line and classical modes that distinguishes their verse sharply from that of poets like Grace Perry and Bruce Dawe. Both have been closely engaged with literature as a university discipline. Both have achieved reputations as critics. More important for their poetry, both bring to it the full resources of thought and feeling. Yet what they have in common serves to emphasise rather than to diminish their individuality as poets. The diversity of their talents is borne out even more clearly in their two most recent books of poetry.

37:

In *Surprises of the Sun*, James McAuley continues to write with the highly-charged simplicity (one might almost write austerity) that has characterized his verse in recent years. But despite the self-imposed disciplines of language and versification, the poetry in this book is rich and varied. The book is in five sections. The first, 'On the Western Line' comprises a dozen autobiographical poems set mainly in his boyhood home in Sydney's western suburbs. The poetry here is very well sustained, and more varied than that of the

later poems as it responds to shifts in time and mood in the poet's mind. Lines like these, in which the wonder of childhood is very well rendered:

38:

Does that wistaria vine still break in flower
Like grape-clusters transformed to lilac light
For bees to hover in? It had a power,
Then, to absorb all feeling into sight

39:

give way to the equally effective 'numb' language of 'Father, Mother, Son' or the light-heartedness of a wedding-song, '20th June 1942'. This is a rewarding group of poems in which McAuley's versatility and control are seen at their best. Section II, 'Mutabilities', like Section I, draws closely upon private experiences. Technically accomplished, it contains one or two moving lyrics ('Pieta', for example); but the poems generally are slighter than those of the remaining sections, and are pitched in a lower key. Section III, entitled 'The Six Days of Creation' is a remarkable series of six short poems which at first view seem poorly equipped to support their vast theme. The poems, however, are concerned basically not with the cosmic acts of creation (though these are their backdrop), but with the 'time of the Paradisal Man' and the divine gift of woman. The very closely interwoven sequence is, then, a celebration of human love, of the mystery of becoming 'one flesh' and ultimately of marriage as the symbol of Christ and the Church. The graceful lyric form is the outward emblem of a poem that is at once an epithalamium and a hymn of praise: a proper setting for the re-enactment of divine creation by created man. Like Sections I and II, IV consists of a number of loosely-

related poems; these have, however, assumed a more sombre tone than the earlier ones, reflecting the frame of mind of the poet as he looks back on a time of spiritual testing.

40:

I've done twenty years hard

41:

he writes, carrying over into the verse the preoccupation of the Section's title, 'On Parole'. But if the Section provides, in 'The Cloak', one of the darkest poems in the volume, in 'Autumn Ode' it provides one of its most beautifully rendered lyrics. Section V is memorable for two fine poems, the short elegy 'In Regard of T. S. Eliot' and the whimsical tale of 'The Convict and the Lady'. Taken as a whole, then, *Surprises of the Sun* seems to fulfil the wish expressed by James McAuley in his 'Autumn Ode':

42:

Let my music, if with a sense of lateness,
Be noble, fresh and clear —
Contemplative, although
The ground-bass gathers tremors from our fear.

43:

Those familiar with the work of A. D. Hope will find little to surprise but much to please in his latest book, *New Poems 1965–1969** It is gratifying to have this book so soon after his early retirement from his university chair 'to write'; but if one glances back at his output over the past few years, it is not surprising. It is not surprising but pleasing to learn that *Poetry* (Chicago) has awarded him the Levison Prize for two poems printed here. If in the poetry itself there is little to surprise and much to delight, it is largely because of the vigour with which it confirms in its twenty poems the range of his accomplishment (there is no other poet at

present writing in Australia who can quite match the variety of his work) and his resolve to bring to the poetry of the twentieth century something of the wit, order and detachment of the eighteenth. The diversity of his poetry is apparent enough. The transcendental quality of these lines from 'On an Engraving by Casserius':

44:

She turns her head as though in trouble or shame,
Yet with a dancer's gesture holds the fruit
Plucked, though not tasted, of the Fatal Tree.
Something of the first Eve is in this pose
And something of the second in the mute
Offering of her child in death to be
Love's victim and her flesh its mystic rose.

45:

is, on the face of it, a far remove from the light-hearted yet acute observation of his prize-winning Yeats poem:

46:

Sheep in the meadow,
Cows in the corn;
Come Willy Butler
Blow up your horn!
Out of such moments
Beauty is born.

47:

Different qualities again are seen in the metaphysical probings of the Angel in 'Vivaldi, Bird and Angel':

48:

... men in the Great Music, I surmise
Must also share, for what in reveries,
In separateness, in silence they create,
They only play if they participate.
These six girls and their master play as one
Perfected creature; in that unison
They touch, at least, the state in which we move:
A mutual ecstasy of consenting love.

49:

The differences arise directly, of course, from what is going on in the poems. Whether a poem is erotic, meditative, satirical, depends on the poet's response to a particular situation at a particular time, differentiating Hope from Hope as it differentiates Hope from Stow and each poet from all others. But the unifying element in the poetry of A. D. Hope, what links the absurd comedy of 'The Great Baboons', the intricately developed parable of 'Vivaldi, Bird and Angel' and the urbane wit of 'The Perfume' (with its fine ironical twist of Donne's title), is his acceptance of a poetic discipline which, with the full consent of a philosophically-inclined mind, channels the strong impulses at work into poetry that is deeply-felt and clear-sighted, heady and perfectly controlled. The things that are memorable in his work — his ability to meet the demands of the longer poem, his preservation of the tradition of elegant love poetry and his sustained championship of exegetical verse, his ready apprehension and castigation of absurdity, stupidity and pretence, his constant questioning of social, moral and literary values, above all, his integrity as a poet, have established him as first in a

company of accomplished poets. This latest volume confirms his position.

* BOOKS REVIEWED

Randolph Stow, *A Counterfeit Silence* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1969).

Les A. Murray, *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1969).

Bruce Dawe, *Beyond the Subdivisions* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1969).

Nan McDonald, *Selected Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1969).

Grace Perry, *Two Houses* (Sydney: South Head Press, 1969).

James McAuley, *Surprises of the Sun* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1969).

A. D. Hope, *New Poems 1965–1969* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1969). The annual Levison Prize was awarded by *Poetry* (Chicago) for ‘The Apotelesm of W. B. Yeats’ and ‘The School of Night’.

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